PREFACE

When Europeans arrived on the shores of present-day Rhode Island, they encountered a wilderness. Just back from the bayshore meadows, lush temperate forests teeming with wildlife stretched inland. Wild rivers cascaded through verdant valleys, tumbling across natural falls and ripples before meandering through thick marshes to bay estuaries. Towering giants--oaks, white pines, hickories, chestnuts--ruled supreme over a forest canopy that extended as far as the eye could see.

This place--a space in time as much as in geography--has vanished. All that remains of the original Rhode Island landscape are evocative Native American place-names whose translations conjure imaginations--hazy images at best--of places as they once existed in the distant past: Moshassuck--*place where the moose drink*; Pawtucket--*place of falling water.*

As is true of much of the American experience, the story of Rhode Island's success and growth through history has been intertwined with the beating back of its wilderness, and the invention of ingenious means to productively employ the resources embodied in its landscape. Successive waves of settlement, agricultural production, industrialization, urbanization, suburbanization and exurbanization have profoundly altered much of the state's original landscape and vegetation.

Today, as the twenty-first century approaches, the saga of human conquest of the Rhode Island landscape continues, albeit with a hard-learned appreciation of the vital human interest in, and necessity of, protecting its essential elements. The instruments and venues of alteration have changed. Although agriculture and silviculture continue to contribute to the state's economic product, we use decidedly less land for sustenance and forest products than in past eras, and second growth forests in the state's more rural areas have significantly recovered from their near cut-over conditions of the early 20th century, but, the drive to clear and consume land continues. Development pressures have shifted outward from the original focus of dense urban settlements along the upper Bay and rivers; as the century draws to a close, forested land in western and southern Rhode Island is increasingly seen as a choice setting for new residential growth.

Until quite recently, a plan for urban forestry could have been viewed as superfluous. Up until 30 or so years ago--one or two generations--the vast majority of Rhode Islanders lived tightly packed together in the major industrial cities of the state. The cities of Rhode Island's past, while gritty, were also green. Post cards and photos show turn of the century era factory compounds draped in ivy and clustered around green, tree-lined courtyards. Whether we view it as paternalism or civic-mindedness, many of Rhode Island's past captains of industry saw nurturing trees and greenry as part of their civic duty as leaders of the community. While cities such as Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Woonsocket were more densely settled in pre-World War II era than they are today, old streetscape photos and newsreels of this era seem to show our cities as more verdant than they are today. Rhode Islanders who have lived in the state for 35 or more years will attest that this image is probably less illusion than an indication of the "greenness" that has been lost, steadily if imperceptibly, in our cities.

Some arboreal giants that presided over their urban neighborhoods for generations were brought down by the hurricanes of '38 and '54. Legions of stately elm trees--branches intertwining cathedral-like high above the heads of passersby--graced the boulevards and avenues of most Rhode Island cities until the devastation of Dutch Elm disease in the 1950s and 1960s. Urban renewal, in vogue from the 1950s to the '70s, cleared away not only old buildings, but also the grand old trees that shaded them.

Countless chestnuts, oaks, beeches, and other yard trees were also cut by homeowners to yield space for off-street parking, garages, patios, pools, decks, and other manifestations of our rising affluence. Much the same happened around public and commercial structures as the greenery that originally surrounded them gave ground to expansion of buildings or parking. Street widening and utility projects caused further tree loss. While we have scant statistical evidence to demonstrate it—we apparently never thought enough of our urban trees to track such trends---our collective memories and some fading photos command the conclusion that Rhode Island's cities have become progressively less green over the last several generations.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, as the trees were disappearing from our cities, so were the people. During this same period development surged outward from the state's urban centers into surrounding suburbs and small villages, also impacting upon community tree resources. Today, low-density residential development continues to proliferate in rural areas throughout the state. Trees continue to be cut and land cleared to accommodate fleeing urbanites seeking rural homesites in "rustic wooded settings," uncognizant of the fact that, *collectively*, the impact of their individual locational decisions risk extinguishing the very environmental features and rural charm that lured them there.

Together, over a few short decades, these closely intertwined trends---loss of trees in our cities, and the clearing of forest land for new development in suburban and rural areas---have left Rhode Island a significantly less green place.

Acknowledgements

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Adoption

This *Urban and Community Forest Plan for Rhode Island* was adopted as State Guide Plan Element 156 by the State Planning Council on May 13, 1999, following a public hearing conducted on May 3, 1999. Amendments to adopted State Guide Plan elements are made periodically to report progress, incorporate new data, revise policies, and update recommendations. All proposed amendments are reviewed by the State Planning Council in accordance with its adopted *Rules of Procedure*, and are presented for public comment at a public hearing prior to action by the Council.

Comments

Comments on this plan are welcomed. Contact George Johnson via email at gjohnson@doa.state.ri.us , by phone at (401) 222-6479 or write to the R.I. Statewide Planning Program, One Capitol Hill, Providence, RI 02908-5872.

Further information

Further information on tree resources in Rhode Island is available from the following agencies and organizations:

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